TESTIMON OF DAVID BENTON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
MARINE CONSERVATION ALLIANCE
www.marineconservationalliance.org
For
U.S. House Resources Committee, Subcommittee for Fisheries and Oceans
Relating to Programs to address Marine Debris

Introduction

Thank you Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to testify before you today with regards to legislation to establish new federal programs in the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the United States Coast Guard (USCG), to address the problem of persistent marine debris and its effect on the marine environment.

My name is David Benton. I am the Executive Director for the Marine Conservation Alliance (MCA) as well as the Marine Conservation Alliance Foundation (MCAF), a related 501 (c) (3) not for profit corporation. In my testimony today, I will use the term MCA to refer to both organizations. The MCA is a coalition of seafood harvesters, processors, coastal communities, Community Development Quota organizations, and others interested in and dependent upon the groundfish and shellfish fisheries off Alaska. Taken together, the membership of the MCA represents about 80% of the harvesting and processing of groundfish and shellfish off Alaska.

Alaska produces roughly half of the nation's commercial fisheries landings by volume. Fisheries account for about 35,000 jobs in Alaska, and are valued at over $1 billion dollars in value. In 2003, the ex-vessel value of groundfish alone was $608.4M with $127.1M from the Gulf of Alaska and $481.3M from the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands. The gross value of the 2003 groundfish catch, after primary processing, was approximately $155B (F.O.B. Alaska). In addition to groundfish, halibut and shellfish generated $165.9M and $175.4M ex-vessel values respectively. In 2003, 1037 vessels caught Alaska groundfish.

Most importantly, the majority of our coastal communities are built around a fisheries based economy, and without a stable fishery resource base many of these communities would not exist. It is because of this dependence upon the sea and its resources that Alaskans work hard to ensure that conservation comes first, and that fishery resources are managed for their long term sustainability.

As part of the seafood industry's commitment to sustainability, MCA has been involved in marine debris clean-up efforts since 2002. We have conducted marine debris clean-up projects annually on St. Paul Island, one of the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea, and have supported community clean-up efforts in Dutch Harbor/Unalaska.

MCA's marine debris clean-up program started as a modest industry initiative, but we soon realized that the scale of the debris problem, coupled with the remote nature of most

of coastal Alaska, called for resources beyond those solely available to the industry. In 2005 MCA received federal funding to support our efforts and are expanding the program to include clean-up projects around the coast of Alaska. With 33,000 miles of coastline, most of which is in extremely remote areas subject to very harsh conditions, this is a daunting task. Even with the additional funding and the resources it brings, we are not in a position to adequately address the marine debris clean-up challenge in Alaska, and we therefore welcome the efforts of the Congress to bring additional help through the legislation you are considering here today.

MCA is proud of the work we have done to date. The effort on St. Paul has been carried out in close cooperation with the tribal government on the island, and their professional environmental department Tribal ECO. The program has hired roughly 50 local people, and has collected over 100 tons of marine debris. We have shipped approximately 17 tons off island, and hope to get the rest off this winter. As part of the St. Paul project, we have conducted a preliminary analysis of the composition of the debris we have collected. Ninety eight percent (98%) is plastic in one form or another. Derelict fishing gear accounted for about 33% by number and 88% by weight of the materials collected. Of the materials collected, debris comes from all over the world, with water bottles from Japan, a plastic cart from Brazil, and a soap dispenser from Korea, as well as derelict fishing gear. MCA plans to fully inventory these materials once they are removed from the island and before they are disposed of. We are especially interested in identifying the sources of the derelict fishing gear, some of which appears to be decades old.

In addition to the St. Paul clean-up project MCA is developing a prototype program for application around the coastline of Alaska. We are looking at projects on St. George Island in the Pribilofs, in Atka and Nikolski in the Aleutians, Matkushin Bay/Unalaska Island, on Kodiak Island, in Sitka, on the outer Kenai Peninsula coast, and elsewhere. We are also investigating alternative disposal methods, including recycling of recovered materials.

This program is built around several elements, most of which are still in development.

First, we rely on information collected by local governments, organizations, and individuals as well as state and federal agencies in identifying potential clean-up sites. In this regard we have contacted roughly 60 coastal communities around Alaska. We have also made inquiries to state and federal resource management agencies that either manage coastal areas in Alaska or that have programs and field personnel that could provide information on potential clean-up sites and priorities. From these inquiries, we are developing an initial database of potential clean-up priorities.

Second, MCA has had to develop our own assessment protocols to determine the nature and scope of the debris at a particular site. This is still very much a work in progress, and we have found that a “one size fits all” approach may not be practical given the diverse and remote nature of many of these areas.

Third, MCA has had to develop procedures for meeting agency permitting requirements necessary to accomplish clean-up projects in the field. The array of state and federal permits is somewhat daunting, especially to residents of remote villages that may want to conduct a clean-up in their area. In most instances, the impact of the clean-up effort is negligible yet there remains the need to secure coastal zoning permits, approvals to operate on state or federal land, approvals from the Corp of Engineers under certain conditions, and of course the ever present requirement to conduct a NEPA analysis. MCA is working with state and federal agencies to develop standardized approaches to permitting that will hopefully streamline this process.

And, because MCA wants to place an emphasis on using local expertise and labor in the actual clean-up effort, we have been working to develop contracting procedures that take into account the various levels of training and expertise present in the variety of Alaska's coastal communities.

These issues relate to our clean-up efforts. MCA is also beginning a program of cooperative research to develop fishing gears, or fishing practices to minimize gear loss. These cooperative research projects will involve fishermen, gear manufacturers, state and federal scientists, and University researchers. We have found that such cooperative research projects bring a much needed synergism between scientists and industry experts to address real life problems in a practical and cost effective manner. We envision gear modification studies and studies to investigate alternative fishing practices to reduce gear loss. We are interested in habitat mapping efforts to identify sensitive habitats that can be protected or avoided, with an emphasis on reducing gear loss.

Coupled with this research effort is an education component to work with the fleet and the public to promote the use of modified gear, better fishing practices, and steps that can be taken to reduce the amount of debris that gets into our oceans.

What we are learning from this experience is that there is no central marine debris database, there are a variety of reporting protocols that are not standardized, that permitting for such projects is cumbersome and inefficient, and that there is a real need to provide training to potential clean-up partners in many of our communities. We have also learned that there is no coordinated research effort to address the root causes of marine debris, and that public education efforts are minimal.

As you can see, we are embarking on an ambitious program that looks at the marine debris problem through clean-up, prevention, and education. But we recognize that our efforts are just a small beginning. We do not have the resources to do the job that needs to be done even in Alaska, let alone elsewhere. It will take the hard work of people all over the country. The legislation before your committee is a good first step towards addressing some of the issues.

Based on our experiences to date, I would offer the following comments on the legislation.

1. The legislation would establish a marine debris program within NOAA. This is the appropriate agency to be the lead in this effort. However, the legislation relies almost entirely on federal agencies for support and implementation. It would be useful to include the states and the maritime industries in the up-front planning and implementation of the program. This is especially true in the mapping, identification, inventorying, removal and prevention components of the program. In this regard, the Interagency Marine Debris Committee could benefit from having representation of the maritime industries to assist in developing cost effective mechanisms to identify, reduce, and prevent marine debris.
2. The program elements need to promote cooperative efforts between federal agencies and the maritime industries, including cooperative research on methods to reduce and prevent marine debris. In addition, the legislation focuses much of its attention on sea-based marine debris including derelict fishing gear, but land-based sources of plastics and debris are a significant source that needs to be addressed as well.
3. The grants program can be a significant help in addressing the marine debris issue in a comprehensive manner. To meet this promise, the program needs to be clear in its priorities, cost effective, and simple in its administration. It is unclear what the priorities are for the grants program. MCA believes that the grants program should be directed at three interrelated priorities. Marine debris clean-up and removal, cooperative research to reduce and prevent debris from entering the environment, and public education about how to prevent marine debris with an emphasis on education within the maritime industries on best practices to reduce discharge of potential marine debris.
4. MCA also believes that the grants program should emphasize projects at the local or regional level. The 50% matching requirement will put these grants beyond the ability of many local organizations or communities, especially in remote areas such as Alaska's small coastal communities. In addition, the project review and approval section of the bill, which requires external peer review of each project, establishes a complex and bureaucratic project approval process. MCA questions the need for such a process and is concerned that it would set up unnecessary roadblocks to many worthwhile projects.
5. As a final point, the legislation places great emphasis on increased reporting, regulations, and enforcement. All of these have their place, but it should be recognized that the maritime industries, including the seafood industry, are heavily regulated now with very detailed reporting requirements and strict enforcement. The bill is lacking in direction to NOAA and the Coast Guard to develop cooperative prevention programs or incentives to industry to take further steps to reduce marine debris. Recycling programs and other incentives could make a significant contribution to prevention.

In conclusion, MCA is engaged in a program to help address the marine debris problem in Alaska, especially as it relates to derelict fishing gear. The legislation the Committee is considering could greatly assist us in our efforts and provide additional resources to other agencies and organizations to address the problem as well. I want to thank you for this opportunity to testify before you and welcome any questions you might have.